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WASHINGTON, DC—U.S. Congressman Peter DeFazio voted last night against a telecommunications bill that favors telecom giants over small businesses and lacks adequate consumer protections. The so-called Communications Opportunity, Promotion, and Enhancement (COPE) Act of 2006, H.R. 5252, passed by a vote of 321 to 101. An amendment offered by Representative Ed Markey, which would have ensured “net neutrality” in the bill, failed. DeFazio voted for the Markey amendment.

Net neutrality is the principle that ensures small and independent web sites open just as easily on people's computers as sites run by large corporations do. As a result of lobbying efforts by large telecom firms, COPE includes provisions that would require community groups, small businesses and everyday people to pay fees to ensure their web sites open as quickly as those run by large firms.

In addition, the bill would grant telecom companies a national franchise, which would mean companies would not be required to provide cable TV service in rural areas or extend service beyond the most profitable areas in cities. Such a national franchise would also remove the little oversight that local governments have over cable service providers and remove their authority over rights of way.

“Ten years ago, I was one of only 16 members of Congress to vote against the 1996 Telecom Act because I did not believe it would result in more choices, better quality, and lower prices for consumers,” DeFazio said. “I've been proven right-few of the promises have come true.

“The COPE Act aims to update the Telecom Act, but does nothing to improve the consumer protections lacking in the 1996 bill. The only people it benefits are the bigwigs at telecom companies, who will now be able to legally discriminate against folks who cannot afford to pay higher rates for services which they now receive for free, or who happen to live in rural areas. The Internet is a great example of ingenuity and innovation at work, and we should not stifle that by passing legislation that favors the wealthy and powerful.”